The Fatted Calf

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The Fatted Calf

by galwednesday

Summary

When Will was old enough to be left alone while his dad was out on a job, but too young to go along and make himself useful, he went fishing somewhere he shouldn't have.

Notes

I don't know how to explain this other than to say 1. half of it was written in the summer of 2020 under the influence of recurring fevers, and 2. it's part of the swamp god televangelist cinematic universe, a concept that was collaboratively brainstormed but which up until this point only aetataureate had actually delivered on. Now I too have fulfilled my part of this devil's bargain and it's only, let me check my watch, two years late. @jinlinli you're up at bat, don't think we've forgotten how rad the Hawaii version of this concept would be.

Will pulls up to the Dream Lodge, chosen for its crescent moon logo on the highway exit sign, just in time to interrupt the manager locking up for the night. He's too worn out to be anything better than apologetic about it. Sometimes he can pull off charming, if he lets his accent slip southern and smiles on the right beats, but not when his hips are locked up and his back is throbbing from seven hours of nonstop driving.

The manager opens the office back up for him anyway. The boxy PC on the front desk is turned off, but she writes his name and debit card number in a notebook and locks it in the top drawer. "Piece of shit takes half an hour to boot up anyway," she says, handing back his card. "I'll run it in the morning. Will it clear?"

"Yes, ma'am." He's had the same checking account at his dad's old credit union for years, opened with his earnings from the first job his dad cut him into. In all that time it's only earned enough interest to buy a quarter tank of gas, but he's never had his card declined.

"Then we'll be just fine." She gives him a tarnished brass key with a blue rubber tag that says 303. The motel is a single story tall. Will just nods and clears out so she can lock up again.

He finds 303 eventually by walking around the long line of rooms, his feet crunching on gravel as he passes under the sign advertising vacancies. An inverted tornado of white moths swirls below the streetlight at the edge of the parking lot.

The AC hasn't been running, so the air in the room is hot and stale, smelling of plywood and cheap detergent. Will turns the AC on and sets the temperature knob as low as it will go before he takes a shower. He's showered every day since leaving the desert, but the endless rush of water still feels like a novelty, and he lets the spray pour into his mouth, warm and iron-tangy from the minerals in the pipes.

The room isn't much cooler when he gets out, but it's less humid, doesn't settle so thick against his skin. He stands with a towel around his shoulders and lets his hair drip.

The past week has been quiet, his dreams dull and disconnected, but the air pressure's dropping. He thinks about unplugging the TV before bed, but the cables are all snarled together behind the rickety TV stand and the power outlet is out of sight behind a heavy bureau. With a storm rolling in it might not matter if it was unplugged anyway. It's an old TV, square with a concave screen, and he flicks the glass with a fingernail to hear it ring before he drops onto the mattress. He's tired even after a week's reprieve. He never sleeps as well as when he dreams of home.

It's not a boom year for cicadas, but he can hear a choir of them anyway, getting fainter as the air dries. He closes his eyes and listens until the familiar melodies drop off to nothing, and all he's left with is the rattle of the AC.

Will wakes up to voices. The television is on, has been for a while. The volume is set high, but that’s not what woke him. He's used to radios and televisions coming alive between midnight and dawn. The glitching hour.

"One phone call now could change your life forever," the man on the television is saying. Will doesn’t bother to lift his head. The pillowcase is softer now, dampened by sweat. "I know you've been waiting for a sign, and this, right here, right now, this is your sign. With one phone call, one small donation to get you started down the right path, you can accept God's grace. We pass signs by every day because we're too blind to see them. All of us are surrounded by God's light, by His eternal love, and that light casts shadows, long shadows, shadows as deep and dark as God himself," the man says. His voice has changed, the rapid fire cadance of an auctioneer giving way to something slower and softer. "Those shadows are a shelter. Wouldn't you like to rest a while? Wouldn't you like to enter that warm, dark haven and truly *rest* ?"

Will yawns and cracks an eye to check the time on the digital nightstand clock, the numbers angular and vivid red. 5:12am. Too early for any local diners to be open, but he passed a Waffle House by the interstate turn-off. He could get a coffee.

He rolls upright, plants his bare feet against scratchy carpet. Stretches his ankles and then his toes until the joints pop.

"True rest can’t be bought," the man on the television says, his cohost no longer nodding along, her hands woven together too tightly in her lap. "It can't be won. It can only be given, if you're willing to give back with all of your heart. With blood and bone and your last gasping breath."

"And giving is just what the Lord needs you to do," his cohost cuts in. Her smile is broad but her eyes are worried. She takes over as the man goes silent, looking straight into the camera. When Will gets up to pull on clean boxers and yesterday's jeans, the man's eyes follow him, tracing his path to the bathroom.

Will looks in the mirror and lines up his pinkie with the bags under his eyes. They're getting wider every year, like a tree trunk adding rings.

He lost his toothpaste a few hundred miles back, but when he checks the drawer below the sink there’s a half-used travel-sized tube forgotten behind the spare wash cloths. He squeezes a pea-sized lump out for the sake of hygiene, flicks it into the sink with his finger, and fills his toothbrush with half of what’s left. When he was a kid he’d let the foam dribble down his lips and chin and make faces in the mirror. Playing at being a rabid dog. His dad caught him at it and told him off for wasting toothpaste, but he never quite lost the habit of baring his teeth at his own reflection.

A light green moth as big as his palm clings motionless to the outside of his door. He shuts the door carefully and shakes out his hands, loosening the stiffness built up from hours of gripping the steering wheel, before getting into his truck and heading into town.

He means to head to the Waffle House, but he pulls out of the motel parking lot and blinks back to himself already on the interstate, driving towards the edge of pale blue washing out the stars. He takes the next exit and turns around. By the time he's back in town it's a quarter past seven and he has his choice of breakfast spots.

Rita's Diner has a wall of curved glass bricks by the front door, looking molten to the touch in the orange light of dawn. There's a round dessert case by the counter, motionless but lit up inside, holding wedges of lattice-top pie and cake slices swirled with ridged buttercream.

The waitress herds him to a booth and comes back with coffee. "Regular or unleaded?" she asks, holding brown and orange-topped coffee pots in either hand.

"Regular, please." Caffeine doesn't do much for him anymore, his sleep or lack thereof given over to stronger influences, but the caffeinated pot is usually fresher. He nods at the dessert case. "Is that supposed to spin?"

"Hasn't in a while. Refrigeration still works fine, though, if you're after some pie."

"I could take a look at it, if you'd like."

This gets him a second look, and she lingers on the layer of burnt umber mud caked onto his boots, but it doesn't give her much pause. "Be my guest. I'll owe you a fifty if you can fix it."

"You're the owner?"

"Since my father passed, God rest his soul. If he can find it."

"He did," Will's mouth says, earning him another long, evaluating look. He escapes to his truck to get his toolbag. The owner is in the kitchen by the time he gets back inside, the only other customer a trucker sitting with his back to the rest of the diner. Will takes his coffee mug over to the dessert case and sets to work.

It's soothing to do repairs, and he takes longer than he needs to unscrewing the recessed panel covering the dessert stand's mechanical guts. The case is shoved tight against the wall and halfway into a corner, leaving an awkward gap where he can only work the screwdriver in small increments, his knuckles scraping against the floor on each turn.

The problem is simple, once he gets the engine exposed. Two wires, their stripped ends slightly corroded, twisted too loosely together at their point of connection. It's not until he's replaced them with fresh wire and wrapped the whole bundle so it won't come apart again that he remembers.

His own hands, small, working the screwdriver at an angle, lying on the slightly sticky floor so his father wouldn't have to strain his bad shoulder to reach. The owner, mustache graying, coming over every five minutes to complain, first about the smell of cigarette smoke carried

in on his father's jacket and then about how long the repair was taking. It had been a more complicated job the first time; they had to trace the fault to the fan that blew cool air upwards into the dessert case. Will's father had waited until the owner's back was turned after his third impatient check-in to catch Will's eye and silently untwist two wires until they were barely connected, sure to come apart with time. Will hadn't needed words to understand.

"Here," the owner says, startling him. She sets a slice of pecan pie by his elbow. "On the house."

"Thanks," he says by rote. He eats it slowly, sucking the sugar off his teeth in between bites as he closes up the engine panel, screwing everything together tightly. The owner comes by again as he's packing up his tool bag.

"For a job well done," she says, handing him four folded twenties.

Will peels two of them off and tries to pass them back. "We agreed on fifty."

"Fifty for the dessert stand. The extra's for the radio." She points at the radio, twice the size of a toaster and styled to look like a jukebox, that turned itself on sometime while Will was working. He can see a crack in the case where it was dropped at some point. It gets louder as soon as he looks at it.

"It's not at rest," the man on the radio says calmly. "No rest for the weary, no rest for the wicked. But his soul was found, oh yes, it was run to ground, chased through a forest of new moon black until it faltered and was born down, down, down–"

Will turns the volume knob to zero. The speakers continue to crackle, lullaby soft. "I don't need the extra," he says, "but if you have some space in your dumpster, I have some junk to unload from my truck."

The owner keeps staring at the radio until Will steps into her line of sight. Her name is Poppy; he'd been so careful not to look at her nametag, but it's too late now. "Sure," she says finally. "Danny! Give the man a hand."

The line cook helps him unload the water jugs from the back of his truck. They were bone dry when he left the desert, but now an inch of stagnant water sits in each, cloudy green with algae. The skeleton of a leaf floats to the surface of the jug Danny raises to his face to look at more closely, until Will takes it out of his hands and swaps it for one that's lighter.

Will tosses the last jug into the dumpster while Danny holds up the lid. He takes a step towards his truck, then turns back. "Don't let Poppy close up by herself tonight," he says.

Danny leans against the wall, arms crossed, but he's listening. Danny's already done him one favor. Will has a foot in the door. "Why's that?"

"She got some news that has her shaken up. Hide her flask, if you can do it without her noticing."

Danny uncrosses his arms and reaches out. His hand is warm on Will's cheek, his fingers carrying the sharp scent of the onions he's been chopping. A small cut on his thumb reopens as soon as he touches Will's face; Will closes his eyes and can hear the muttered *fuck* as Danny nicked it opening bacon that morning, the smell of blood drowning out the tang of onions. "You've come a long way, haven't you?"

A rumble of thunder startles them apart. Will backs up, avoiding eye contact. Maybe too late, but no reason not to try. Danny doesn't follow, at least, and as Will pulls out of the parking lot he sees the back door swing shut. He and Poppy could still make it through. Some people do.

Will thinks of wires carefully untwisted at his father's hand, retribution for an insult and a guarantee of future work all in one. It's a strange thing, to remember the ways his father taught him to protect himself, back when Will needed protecting. Before he was made into a thing people needed protection from.

He spends the day in his motel room, stretching out his back and hamstrings and reading the second half of the paperback he got at his last convenience store stop. There's a McDonalds and a Burger King on opposite corners of an intersection near the motel, so he stops at one for lunch and the other for dinner. It's close enough to walk, but he takes the car so he can go through the drive-thru. He doesn't want to risk any more face-to-face conversations.

The television is already on when he gets back, a nature documentary playing footage from a deep sea dive. The volume ticks up as Will rearranges his pickles around the edge of his burger. He tears the ketchup packet open with his teeth and squirts it into the well the pickles create.

"The angler fish has adapted to the sunless depths by developing its own light," the narrator says. "One light shining in the darkness to draw in prey, a beacon luring in the lost and the weary like a lighthouse embedded in a rocky coastline. Guiding them into jaws yawning wide, open arms waiting to welcome them home."

Will turns the television off. It turns back on a few seconds later. Will takes his hamburger out to eat in the parking lot.

He finishes eating in the bed of his truck, licking salty smears of melted cheese and hamburger grease from his fingers. The breeze pushes the heat of the parking lot into his face, up his shirt, down his mouth whenever he takes a new bite. He closes his eyes.

Crushed seed pods cling to the bottom of his feet, sticky and papery, softening the grit of the warm asphalt below. The air smells like flowers he can't name.

A sharp lance of pain brings him back to himself. He opens his eyes to darkness, checks the sky first and sees a half moon hanging overhead. The motel is a long stretch of empty road

behind him, its neon blue sign flickering. He’s standing in the street in a sweat-soaked undershirt and boxers.

Will picks his foot up, reaching down and feeling around carefully, tracing the object lodged in his heel. The pain swells and throbs as he pulls it free. It’s too dark to see more than a gleam of metal, but his fingers know the shape of the metal barb. A fish hook.

He holds it in his open palm, rolling it side to side, and looks at the gully running behind the motel. The trickling of a creek cuts through the distant hum of highway traffic. He knows it didn’t come from there.

The lure attached to the hook isn’t anything special, just the shiny foil of a Hershey’s kiss wrapper carefully folded into a strip and paired with a red feather, all of it wrapped in thin twine by a child’s clumsy hands. The foil is bright, the feather soft and unstained. The hook’s metal is darker, rippled and pitted, heavier than it looks. It radiates heat.

He throws it into the gully, and doesn’t hear a splash.

When Will was old enough to be left alone while his dad was out on a job, but too young to go along and make himself useful, he went fishing somewhere he shouldn't have.

He was better at fishing than most boys his age, good at keeping still and quiet. Good at waiting. They were staying for the summer in a single-story house close to the coast, his dad sleeping in his cousin’s spare room and Will sleeping on the couch. The kitchen window didn’t have curtains, so Will rose like a rooster at the first light of dawn and headed down to the nearest creek. His dad had taught him not to bother with fish smaller than his shin, so most days Will came back empty handed, but it gave him something to do when the sun woke him up so early the TV was playing infomercials instead of cartoons.

His borrowed fishing pole was twice as tall as he was. He carried it tucked under his arm like a knight with a jousting pole, an optimistic pail in his other hand. The creek bed and surrounding woods didn't belong to his father's cousin, but nobody had ever shown up to chase Will off, which made them as good as public land. The hollowed-out wreck of a manor house stood on the hill overlooking the woods, a years-ago fire sparked by summer storms leaving nothing but blackened spears of wood swallowed by honeysuckle. Overgrown rhododendron thickets blocked the doors like briars guarding a ruined castle. A wooden swing brushed the tops of tall weeds around a sycamore tree, its ropes tied to uneven heights on the branch overhead so that the seat arced towards the trunk in a gentle parabola.

Hard rain the day before had left the ground soft and yielding, mud oozing up between pine needles to squish against his bare toes as Will cut through the trees. There was no real path, just a deer trail that avoided the worst of the black raspberry brambles. The creek was high and muddy, the water brown and churning, and Will settled on a boulder with his legs

dangling over the edge and cast out as far as he could. The vibrato of crickets was overtaken by birdcalls as the sky lightened.

The yank was so sudden Will didn't have a chance to let go of the pole. He wouldn't have anyway. It wasn't his to lose. His fingers locked tight around it as the line dragged him down into shockingly deep water.

Later, he could never say if the birds actually went silent the moment the line went taut, or if it just seemed that way because he plunged into the creek so soon after, his ears filled with rushing water instead of song. He couldn't remember what he saw, his eyes half open and stinging with cloudy silt. He couldn't remember swimming to shore. He did remember the pain in his left foot flaring hot and bright when he stepped from mud to stone; he hopped on his right leg the rest of the way to dry land, the pole still clutched tight in his fist and trailing a severed fishing line across the surface of the water. The fishing hook embedded in his heel vanished somewhere between the creek and the house. For years he had assumed it fell out in the woods somewhere, lost along the trail.

The fever he came down with that night landed him in the hospital. He sweated and shivered through hours of C-SPAN droning on the tiny TV mounted in a ceiling corner, too tired to find the remote or remember to ask a nurse to change the channel for him. His memories of the small green-walled room were blurry at the center and fever-bright at the edges, but the dreams he fell into whenever he closed his eyes stayed with him for years after. The landscapes of his dreams were full of depthless shadows, velvet soft against his overheated senses. It felt like he walked for hours, passing boats marooned in shallow ponds and colossal ruins of mildewed stone, with only the faintest of humid breezes sweeping rhythmically over his skin, like the whole world was inhaling. Breathing him in. When he got tired of walking, he veered off the packed earth trails into the forests on either side, climbing trees with smooth bark and broad ash-gray leaves. Will scanned the horizon on all sides, trying to spot the bright flare of encroaching dawn. He never found it. The dark was endless.

The doctors hadn't done much more than flood him with IV antibiotics and scold him for not coming in earlier to get a tetanus shot, but after three days his fever broke. His father pulled him out that evening before the hospital added another overnight stay to the growing list of charges. Will stood next to his father as he signed the paperwork for Will's release, feeling shaky on his feet but proud to be upright, leaning on one leg to keep the weight off his bandaged heel. The nurse behind the desk gave him a smile that went tight when his father gave the Motel 6 as their current address.

She'd been right to judge; they left town two days later, before the bill could arrive.

Will limps back to his motel room, walking with his left foot arched so he won't get any more dirt on his heel. He pats his pockets and finds them empty, but the key is already in the lock, its tag hanging motionless in the still air.

The AC died overnight. Sweat slicks Will’s chest, the air thick and warm around him. The window doesn’t open more than a couple of inches, a thin metal bar stopping it from swinging any further, so he leaves the door open and goes to wash the bottom of his foot in the bathroom sink. He feels tired enough to fall asleep again, but he goes through his morning routine anyway. The wound on his heel has already closed, the new skin pink and raw, but he gets out his first-aid kit and puts a band-aid over it anyway, the ritual soothingly human.

His duffle is already packed, clean clothes separated from dirty by a demilitarized zone of deodorant and used paperbacks. It takes less than a minute to get his toothbrush and the purloined roll of toothpaste from the bathroom and drop them on top of his clean socks before zipping the whole thing shut.

It’s pouring rain by the time he’s finished, a sudden drenching curtain drawn across the parking lot, blurring the world beyond an arm’s reach. He could wait until the rain passes, but he’s delayed enough. The pull is getting stronger now that he’s given in.

The rain soaks through his jacket in the time it takes to walk to the motel office. The manager looks up, eyes unfocused, when the bell over the door dings.

"Message for you," the manager says, while Will scrapes his palms over his shoulders and arms to flick the worst of the rainwater onto the mat. The floor already has a trail of drops along the cracked linoleum tiles. They have an oily rainbow sheen like gasoline, but all Will can smell is mildew and ozone.

Will waits, but she doesn’t say anything else until he asks, "A message from who?"

Her forehead creases as she roots aimlessly through the paper on her desk, flipping over envelopes with notes scribbled on the back. "I had it here a minute ago. I thought." She trails off and stares at the blank notepad in front of her.

"Don’t worry about it," Will says. "Do you remember what the message was?"

"It's time to come home."

Will nods. She relaxes, settling back into her chair, relieved of a burden. Nice for some.

The clock radio on the manager’s desk clicks on as he returns his keys. The volume is too soft to make out more than the cadence of a commercial, before the announcer’s voice slows to repeat, calmly and deliberately, “Act now. Act now. Act now.”

Will reaches over the desk and turns the radio to a different station. The manager is too busy smiling at him to object; he shouldn’t have slept here, not with her apartment over the office so close to his room, not with a storm rolling in.

“Sorry about this,” he tells her before he leaves. He doesn’t know what he’s apologizing for exactly, isn’t sure anything has happened yet, but he knows the apology is warranted. It always is when they smile at him like that.

He thought of the effect he had on other people as minor until it got someone killed.

It took him years to realize there was something strange about him. People would give him half their sandwich if he'd been in town long enough, or let him stay free at the motel an extra day because he'd fixed the wobbly front step; things they might have done for anyone they liked. He hadn't thought it was anything special at first. It had just seemed like good luck, something that softened the unforgiving margins of itinerant odd jobs into a way of life straight from an old-fashioned children's book, like he was an orphan hopping railway cars and meeting kindly strangers along the way.

The first fall after his father died, he ran out of gas in a small coastal town called Revelations. He stayed put longer than usual; one month stretched to three as his name got around town as a quiet young man who could fix up whatever was collecting dust in storage without charging much for the privilege. A lean summer had left him tired and worn thin, his dad's death that spring leaving him on his own for the first time in his life and in no frame of mind to do the work of chasing down jobs. He'd spent a lot of that summer driving with the radio tuned to any station in range, anchoring himself to one radio tower after another, filling in the silence where he used to hear another body breathing. That was before he knew how dangerous it was to listen, before he learned that his own attention was a beacon.

Revelations was where he'd finally scattered his father's ashes. His father had left behind a few friends all in different states and a brother who'd stopped taking his calls twenty years ago, so there hadn't been a funeral, just a plain opaque jar handed to Will when he gave the coroner's office a check to cover the cremation fee. He'd kept it in his glove box for most of the summer, wedged in place between the annotated road maps he'd long since memorized. When he realized the town he'd landed in for the summer was the same place they'd stayed once upon a time with his father's cousin, he figured it was as good a place as any.

His father's cousin was buried in the local cemetery, but Will scattered his father's ashes at the ocean's edge one morning when the tide was going out. His father had never stayed in one place long. It seemed only right for his remains to have their own chance to travel.

Will shuffled between inns and the cab of his pickup the first month, earning a comfortable night's rest here and there by retuning satellite TV dishes and swapping out refrigerator condenser coils, until a retired couple he met while fixing their Volvo's backfiring engine coaxed him into renting their garage apartment. The space was cramped, just a kitchenette and bedroom with enough extra room for a repair bench, but he only had to knock on the kitchen door to get breakfast in the morning and a thermos of coffee to take along to whatever jobs he picked up throughout the day. The rent was set absurdly low in exchange for him walking the couple's two black labs every dawn and dusk.

Will felt like an impostor every time the neighbors waved at him as he took the dogs out to run through the public trails, silent except for their panting breaths as the pack moved through the trees, but it wasn't a bad feeling. He wasn't anything so official as a dog walker, but he would make daily rounds through the local parks and collect any dog he passed by that wasn't fenced in. The humans had names Will had done his best to forget, the same way he'd

tried to forget every face he'd seen in that town, but he learned the dogs' names based on their collar tags: Charger, Rufus, Bluebell, The Colonel. He'd never wondered why they didn't bark, or why they stuck close to his heels instead of haring off after the chipmunks and squirrels that raced out of their path. Will ran and the dogs fell into step, all of them moving as one. He hadn't questioned any of it. It was strange to him later to think that he'd ever been that young.

He bought his dad's favorite scotch that New Year's, the special occasion liquor his father had drunk on holidays instead of beer, and split the bottle between himself and his kitchenette sink. Will pictured the scotch flowing all the way through the pipes and draining out to the ocean. It was the same as the first alcohol he had ever tasted, a single sip on Christmas once he was old enough to go with his dad on jobs. A real working man, his dad had called him, and let him drink from the bottle cap, tapping it against his own glass in a toast.

The radio clicked on as he emptied the bottle. The countdown to midnight started as a chorus of cheerful shouting, background audio from Times Square, but the raucous yells dropped out gradually as they counted down. By the time the count down reached one, a single voice remained. "Happy New Year," the voice said, smooth and quiet, confident of being heard. "A toast, to new beginnings."

Will closed his eyes and rested his head on the table, the soft murmur of the radio following him into his dreams.

That winter was the longest he could ever remember sleeping in the same bed, and as the days lengthened he thought about what it would be like to stay. He was finding enough work even in the off-season to keep himself fed, and once the vacation crowd came in there would be plenty of boat repair jobs to go around, enough that he could start saving for a security deposit on a bigger place.

At the end of the first day that really felt like summer, a man tried to rob him.

The man was someone he recognized, vaguely, just a face he'd seen some nights in the local bar that sold the cheapest beer. This night, the man followed Will out of that same bar and shoved him into the alley next to it.

The man was more nervous than Will was, the point of his knife wavering in air as the hand that held it shook. Will had been too surprised to really be scared. He hadn't expected it; nothing like this had ever happened to him before.

Will raised his hands and wished he hadn't brought only enough cash to pay for his drink, wished he hadn't left his change as a tip.

"I don't have my wallet," Will said, but the man hadn't listened, demanding that Will give him his *fucking* wallet *right now*. When Will didn't move the man took two steps forward.

Fear licked down Will's chest to his belly, bright and electric as the knife got closer.

And then the man stopped. "Will?" he said, already stepping back. Already lowering the knife. Recognition kicking in, but too late to save him.

The man with the knife went down so fast Will thought he'd tripped. The shadow at the alley's mouth resolved into the outline of another man, another familiar face--Dale, or Derek. Will saw him at the park with his dog sometimes.

Dale, or Derek, grabbed the fallen man by his shirt and dragged him away from Will. More people swarmed, emerging from the bar and the surrounding buildings and converging in the middle of the street. Their outlines reformed every time Will blinked, staccato snapshots of movement. A woman's hair in curlers, her bare foot drawn back for a kick. A teenager driving a baseball bat down like a shovel. Bared teeth lunging in to bite.

The fallen man screamed, briefly. Will turned to the side and threw up his beer and roasted peanuts.

When he straightened, the crowd was still moving. They clawed at what was left in the middle of the ragged circle they formed, their bodies pressed too close together for Will to see more than a dark shine of wet against the pavement at their feet. Bone cracked like a starter's pistol. Will ran, no destination in mind but away.

He's spent so long zig-zagging north and south that it feels strange to drive due east, the setting sun a painfully bright streak in his rearview mirror until he tilts it to face his empty passenger's seat. The miles flash past in between blinks, the pressure behind his ribs easing as he puts more distance behind him, the line gaining a little slack now that he's not fighting the tug.

Will is still hours from the coast when the radio clicks on as he crosses a wide river, the bridge's suspension cables shining white from his headlights where they met the road and disappearing into darkness overhead, a spiderweb of steel keeping the road afloat.

"--pile-up on I-77 south of Charlotte, the wreckage has been cleared but we've got some nasty back-up from the accident earlier. It's been slow going, but the way should be easier now. The pathways are opening, the damage repaired, connections rebuilt that will last far beyond today or tomorrow. No need to push on tonight. Not when your eyes are already aching and the rumble of the engine is more at home in your chest than your own heartbeat."

"You all right there, Johnny? You sound a little--"

"Now is the time to rest," the traffic reporter continues, his voice quiet and firm. Will straightens in his seat, his breaths slowing. The other news anchor tries to interrupt again and goes abruptly silent. "There's a turn coming up on the left, a shallow curve through an elm wood, that will take you to a yellow house where you can lay your head down for the night. You've left them waiting so long already. They can wait a little longer."

The radio is quiet after that, not with the static of a signal lost but with the silence of a live mic with only breathing on the other end. Dead air. Will takes the next left and eases his foot

off the gas until the crunch of gravel under his tires is louder than the engine.

It's too dark to make out the color of the house, but it's light enough to be yellow. The porch light is off. The door is ajar.

Will pushes it open with two fingers and stands in the doorway, staring into the silent house. He feels like an intruder; he feels like an invited guest. When he steps inside he smells the mildewed sweetness of dead wood swelling with water.

There are shoes by the door, men's work boots and women's flats and scuffed tennis shoes with hearts drawn on the worn white tongues; one heart shaped like a valentine's day card, one anatomical, with purple arteries and a spurting teardrop of blood. There's a backpack dropped next to the tennis shoes, A.H. monogrammed on the front. Will takes his shoes off and leaves them with the others before walking deeper inside.

The kitchen has a cold pot of water on the stove and an opened box of spaghetti on the counter. He slips a raw noodle between his lips and crunches it slowly as he walks into the family room, where a basket of half-folded laundry spills onto the coffee table. The air is warm and still as a held breath.

"What happened to them?"

The television flickers on to show an infomercial set. The clapping of the studio audience falters and dies as the presenter smiles into the camera. The overhead set lights burst in a shower of sparks, leaving the presenter's face too backlit to distinguish any features. "Nothing you need to worry about. Rest now."

Will stretches out on the couch, a rolled-up sweater serving as his pillow, and falls asleep to the high-pitched electric whine of the television harmonizing with the cicadas outside.

He dreams of walking through a canyon, sharp-edged cliffs high overhead, sagebrush snagging the hems of his pants. His feet are bare. The riverbed is dry and cracked. Small dark shapes dart into gaps between rocks before he can identify them.

A lumpy silhouette ahead of him resolves into the carcass of a massive stag, its antlers arched into sharp points over the prone body. Carrion birds crowd around, vultures digging at its sides as ravens flutter and shift between its antlers and the ground. What flesh remains has been tanned by heat and sun into taut, smooth planes between knobs of bare bone. The body moves in twitching jerks as the scavengers feast.

Will sets a hand between the antlers, fingers spread wide over sun-warmed bone, and the stag rocks violently as a coyote erupts from a gap in its ribcage. The coyote flees deeper into the desert, but Will doesn't turn to watch it go. He keeps his eyes on the stag, and slowly, under his attention, the great head lifts. Hooves dig new furrows into dry clay as the stag awkwardly gets to its feet, Will's hand sliding down its skull as the creature stands. The vultures flee, but the ravens flutter onto the stag's back, digging their talons into thinly stretched skin.

They walk together towards the scent of water. It takes a long time for the canyon to narrow, for the cliffs to slump down into rounded hills, for the clay to soften underfoot. The stag's gait steadies into something slow and ponderous. The ravens click and whistle amiably, occasionally lifting off to fly a circuit overhead or tug at Will's hair.

At last, a turn in the riverbed reveals a waiting pool of water, deceptively placid on the surface. Will steps forward. The water is cool on his bare feet. For a moment, everything is still.

The stag's hooves break the surface and the water bursts into steam. The ravens erupt from its back and circle above, croaking deafeningly as it wades deeper. A dark cloud of expanding silt boils around its legs, water surging up to cover the bare bone of its knees and swallow the strips of hide hanging from its bleached haunches. Will digs his toes into soft algae over smooth pebbles until he hits mud, anchoring himself against the churning current as brown water froths violently up his waist.

The boiling dies down to a simmer and then a tremble that vibrates the pond's surface but doesn't break it. The stag's skin has settled snugly over bone, coarse bristled fur regrowing as the flesh below fills out with muscle and veins and sinew, dark against the exposed bone of its ribs and haunches. Ravens swirl down from the sky and fly into its empty rib cage, packing themselves inside. Will runs one finger across the living, feather-edged shadow occupying the space where the stag's heart should be and marvels at its softness.

For once, he wakes up rested.

The empty house is silent around him. The television screen is dark. Will eats dry cereal standing up in the kitchen and puts the box back in the pantry when he's done, touching as little as possible and carefully not looking at the shopping lists and postcards pinned to the refrigerator.

His boots leave matte footprints in the sheen of dew on the driveway, humidity transforming his truck windows into frosted glass. Will rubs his finger over the windshield and listens to the condensation squeak. The strange euphoria of giving into the inevitable has faded over the last week, familiar weariness and unfamiliar calm taking its place, and he lets that carry him back onto the eastbound highway.

A few weeks ago, in his final attempt to escape, he'd gone into the desert.

He hadn't gone there to die, but he'd known it might happen. Spending childhood summers on the coast taught him what happened to tourists who thought the ocean was friendly. The desert wasn't any different, except that Will didn't know how to map its currents. But he hadn't seen any better options, and he was out of places to hide.

The final straw had come in Utah. He'd been staying at a run-down inn in exchange for fixing up the engine of the owner's cherry red Chevy pick-up, which had been gently used sometime back in the '80s. It had been a rare challenge to get it running; absorbing work that let his hands stay busy and his mind stay quiet.

He'd lingered too long. People started coming by at twilight, cashiers he'd spoken to or neighbors who'd watched him work. They lingered on the inn's neatly mown lawn while he was trying to sleep and froze like deer whenever they triggered the motion-activated porch light.

His final day there, Will had been humming as he worked, a melody he recognized without remembering its origin. He closed the Chevy's hood after setting the final piece to rights and found himself facing a crowd of dozens, already staring and silent, the last wash of dusk ringing the tallest of them with bronze halos as their hair caught the fading light. The song died in his chest, his mouth forming the shapes of words he didn't know even after his breath froze. For a moment everything was still.

A man his age broke ranks, reaching forward to touch him. When Will flinched back the rest of them seized the man and shoved him to the ground. He'd been bleeding from a broken nose by the time Will managed to push the others back, crimson streaking down his chin and adoration in his eyes as Will pulled him up to his knees. That man had followed Will on foot when he flung himself into the driver's seat and peeled out of town, a running figure growing smaller and smaller in the stolen Chevy's rearview mirror until the burning line of the horizon swallowed him.

Will hadn't been able to pretend anymore that it wasn't getting worse.

He drove west as far and fast as he could, ignoring how his breaths came shorter like he was climbing into thinner air. He pried the radio out of the pickup he'd just finished restoring and threw it out the window without stopping, leaving wire and plastic shards scattered across the highway in his haste to cut off the sermon that took over the speakers, the same patient voice on every frequency telling the tale of Jonah. His heart beat too loudly in his ears for the words to really register, but the calmly implacable voice was more than he could bear.

Three supply stops later, he drove into the desert with a truckbed full of water jugs, bulk cases of protein bars, and a thermal sleeping bag to deal with the shocking cold of desert night. He thought that would be enough, at least for a while. Just for a little while. Long enough for the quiet to smother the buzzing in his ears, long enough for his dreams to settle. For his stream of consciousness to run clear.

He made his makeshift camp in the shade of a low ridge of boulders. Far-off mountains edged the world, shimmering brown or blue or purple depending on the angle of the sun. Will was used to broiling summers, but this heat was brutally dry, sweat evaporating from his skin as soon as it formed. The nights had him shivering in his sleeping bag, wrapped up in foil like the gas station burritos of his childhood, burning through energy too fast as his body tried and failed to adjust to the rapid temperature swing. He shocked himself with static charge every time he touched the metal of the truck. There was no insulation in the desert, no padding between himself and the world; every part of him felt sand-scoured, scraped raw. The quiet was still worth it. Not the quiet of the landscape, which was full of insects and birds and the

distant shrieks of coyotes, but the quiet of the empty socket in his dashboard where the radio used to be. He woke up every morning with cramps in his legs from curling up so tightly, but his sleep was shallow and dreamless, a pond he skimmed the surface of instead of sinking into.

It was peaceful for a while, for a stretch of days he deliberately didn't count, only tracking time by how many jugs of water he had left. He only took a drink when he couldn't bear not to. Hunger tore at him, unimportant compared to the thirst. His body was so loud his mind's clamor was drowned out. He never wanted to leave.

He was down to three jugs of water when a wall of orange light swept in from the east, bright shocks of lightning making the dust flash hot white. The horizon shortened as the ridge of clouds advanced, claustrophobic after so many days of wide open sky. The whine of locusts intensified to a shriek before the rising thunder drowned it out. Will stood transfixed before the storm, breath coming short as the sky was devoured by roiling clouds.

The dust whipping at his face drove him inside the truck. The rain hit all at once, pounding furiously against the metal roof and filling his windshield with riotous living glass, rippling and distorted. He could see and hear nothing but the storm.

And then the radio clicked on as the scent of petrichor rose, wholly out of place above the damp clay. The socket on the dashboard was still empty, exposed wires hanging loose, but the familiar static of a tuning pattern rose as the beating of the rain slowed, snatches of voices rising and falling in the air.

"--found no pattern connecting the–"

"--authorities advise caution as the rise in deaths due to heat stroke continues to–"

"--found no explanation for why they were there, along with several local residents and a tourist from–"

Will fumbled for the door handle and fell out onto his knees, an inch of standing water soaking through his pants. He dug his fingers into the ground and panted for air. The rain was already gone, the storm retreating as suddenly as it had arrived, leaving the canyon shining with a dazzling sheen of water.

"They walk into the desert," the impossible voice on the radio said, his voice slowing and deepening. "They walk into the desert, but they don't walk out. More of them every day; all of them drawn in like sharks to chum until their bodies give out and they drop where they stand."

The ground under Will softened all at once, the clay turning thick and muddy, sucking his body down. He was aware of the roots of the plants around him and how deep they must stretch, how vast the earth was underneath him. He pressed his forehead against the grasping clay and wished it would cover his ears and drown out the radio, but the water was sliding away instead of sinking in, the surface already drying. The ground here was too hard to enter.

"The human body," the voice said, "is seventy percent water." The radio fizzled into static before clicking off.

"Okay," Will said, near soundless, his lips brushing the puddle forming under him. It smelled rich and loamy, all wrong for the heavy clay that anchored the scrub bush around his campsite. He laughed, helpless and hysterical, and felt something within him relax. "Okay."

He stayed bent on hands and knees for a long time, breathing through the pressure of the water on his back, and didn't get up until new cracks were branching through the drying mud.

Will changed into fresh clothes and was back on the road within the hour. Moving east brought the relief of surrender, an unaccustomed lightness in his shoulders. The gas tank had been empty since Utah. It didn't seem to matter. Energized by the sudden rain, silvery green plants unfolded opportunistic blooms and ringed the roadside with meadows of every color. The scent of loam lingered in the truck cab. The absent radio crooned slow, soft melodies as his tires carried him mile after mile.

Will enters the town of Revelations for the third time on a beautiful summer afternoon. The road unfurls smoothly before him, a dark ribbon winding through green archways of leaf cover, the eggy brine of the nearby salt marsh close enough to smell when he rolls the windows down.

He's missed this; air so thick it coats his tongue when he opens his mouth, thinking of the dog his dad had let him keep for a few years who stuck her head out the window to pant in the highway slipstream. There's an animal pleasure to it that eases the tension in his shoulders and has him steering with one palm, fingers relaxed and hanging loose over the wheel's edge. He knows better, but he feels welcomed anyway, the hindbrain anxiety of being out of his territory lessening with every familiar loop in the road.

Will goes to the creek first thing. The road is just wide enough to pull his truck to one side, one tire sinking into thick loam as it dips off the asphalt, and leave it there without worrying someone would take the bend behind it too fast and side-swipe it. He locks the doors out of habit and walks into the woods, skirting thistles and poison oak. An electric blue skink flashes across his path and vanishes into the underbrush. His pants are coated in burrs from the knees down by the time he reaches the water.

A coiled copperhead dozes on the bolder he'd once sat on to fish, half its body in the sun. The bank looks a little different than it did in his dreams, wider and drier than when he'd gone fishing there as a child. In his memories the water was brown, not clear, swollen enough with storm run-off that he'd perched on the boulder just ahead of the creek's twist instead of standing in the water itself. His father had taught him to be wary of fast-moving water, even in a small creek like this. It didn't take much water to drown.

He finds the hook wedged between two stones on the dry edge of the bank. Will picks it up carefully, stroking the cardinal feather between two fingers, and watches blood well up on the hook's barbed tip. Not a lot. Just three drops, gliding over the blackened metal before they fall. The water in the creek rises in a gentle swell to meet them, the bright spots of red swallowed by an eddy that lips at Will's boots.

"Hardly seems worth the fuss," Will says.

"Quality over quantity." The voice comes from behind him, for once undistorted by static.

Will wipes the hook clean on his pants, leaving a thin streak of rust red above the brown burrs. As a child, he had found the cardinal feather in a bush and twisted it together with a candy wrapper from his pocket with his own small hands. The feather, the foil, and the twine he'd used to join them all remain pristine, preserved just like he'd tied them together that morning.

Meditatively, Will presses the hook's tip to the pad of his finger, not hard enough to part skin. An image comes to him: sinking down onto his knees, pressing the hook against the thick veins in his throat, so close to the surface, and digging in. He lets the thought slip away. It isn't the right kind of ending, isn't what the presence behind him wants. It would satisfy neither of them, mere slaughter instead of sacrifice.

"What now?" he asks, twirling the hook around his thumb.

"Now we celebrate your return. Dinner will be served at sundown. Don't be late."

When Will turns, the space between the cypress trees is empty. He walks back up the path to his car, the hook and its lure strangely light in his hand.

The cookout is impossible to miss. As the afternoon fades, every car in town starts heading in the same direction, towards a white clapboard church that hasn't been used for services in years. Will merges into the stream of traffic and parks his truck on the strip of grass being used as overflow, the church's parking lot long since full. Earlier arrivals ferry food from their trunks to the buffet lines forming on picnic tables outside the front steps. The church windows are shuttered, boarded up since two hurricanes ago, but the door stands open, people coming and going to use the bathroom or heat something up in the kitchen. Blankets dot the lawn, corners held down by shoes discarded so bare feet could burrow into cool grass.

It isn't sundown yet, but plenty of people are eating. The picnic tables don't hold the main course, only an appetizer of Will's official welcome home.

He'd never had a home before his father died, and then suddenly he did, even if he spent every year since avoiding it. It was still what his internal compass pointed to; he'd always known when he was getting closer to it or farther away, the distance stretching whenever he

drove further west, a band around his lungs strangling him as it tightened. Now it was impossibly easy to breathe.

For once, people treat him normally, elbowing past him to get to the pasta salad and giving him no more deference than an absent-minded “Hey there, Will, how’ve you been keeping?” They all know him. He knows them, too, as soon as he looks at them, but he doesn’t call any of them by name. He doesn’t say anything at all. They had been left behind when he fled, and they had adjusted to the atmospheric fallout of what he’d woken up. Whatever strange radiation he emits is no different than what they walk through every day. It’s exhilarating to be looked at with recognition but not rapture.

Someone hands him a plate with corn bread and grilled zucchini and potato salad, miraculously still cold, half moons of hard boiled egg firm but yielding under his teeth. No meat. The meat will come later.

Will sees familiar faces in the crowd; a bartender who served him until three hours past closing time in Indianapolis, an Albuquerque hotel manager who let him keep a stray cat in the hotel room until the shelter opened the next morning, a long haul trucker who followed him across three state lines without ever exchanging a word. He wonders how long it'll be before the curly-haired man who’d watched him repair the Chevy appears. Wonders if he’ll drive here or just walk into town on his own tattered feet.

“You’re bleeding,” the mayor says behind him. Will swipes at his nose, red streaking his hand, before he turns around. He rubs his hand on his pants instead of taking the handkerchief the mayor holds out to him.

“It’s time,” Will says, although he meant to make it a question. The mayor claps him on the shoulder and whistles, two fingers in his mouth, sharp and cheerful. Families stand up from their picnic blankets and throw out sauce-smeared paper plates, grouping together into a pack with Will unavoidably at the front.

He leads the procession to the water, further downstream than where he’d visited before, to where the stream broadens and deepens before meeting the ocean another quarter mile out. The frogs go silent as he approaches. His father’s cousin had called the frogs peepers; he’d sat on the porch in the evenings and sung to himself as they started calling. *Jeepers creepers, where’d you get those peepers. Jeepers creepers, where’d you get those eyes.*

Fireflies wink out, leaving an expanding sphere of darkness with Will at the center. Someone in the crowd behind him uses a flashlight app on their phone to light the path. Will hides a smile at the tiny sacrilege.

Five people wait at the river’s edge. Three of them are bound and kneeling, flanked by two sheriff’s deputies, both with their hands resting on holstered guns. The murmuring of the crowd picks up as they spread out behind him, forming a ring of spectators. A barn owl cuts through the clearing in a silent flash of white.

“Well, William my boy?” the mayor says. “It’s your choice. Who’ll it be?”

Will looks over the three of them, and as soon as he looks at them, he knows them. Rage, terror, and awe; the daughter, the mother, the father. Any of them would be accepted; any of them would seal the bargain with blood poured over moon-slicked water. And, from the mayor, eager expectation, like a man holding the leash of hunting dog, ready to let go.

Will looks at the mayor. “You.”

“Now now, William, that’s cheating!” The mayor wags his finger even as the deputies step up to flank him. “You tricky little devil, always so squeamish. I should’ve known!”

Will says nothing, but he doesn’t look away as the deputies bind the mayor’s hands behind his back with twisted cattails woven into a rough twine. The mayor bends his neck compliantly, still smiling, as he’s guided to kneel on the worn stone at the water’s edge. The sheriff steps forward as the deputies draw back, the cleaver in her hand gleaming silver like the water.

The blade is very sharp, the stroke well-aimed; the splash of the head breaking the surface is almost comical in comparison, louder even than the crack of the neck bones parting. Realistically the cleaver should have gotten caught in the bone and stuck there, but it would have detracted from the tone of the moment, and their god is nothing if not theatrical.

The watching crowd relaxes, neighbors murmuring to each other now that the tension has broken. Will turns away at last and walks further upstream. He felt duty bound to oversee the sacrifice, but he doesn’t want to watch the harvest. The snap of a ribcage splitting has him pressing a hand over his own chest, caging his heart behind his fingers.

“What will they do with the rest of it?” he asks.

“Whatever you want,” comes the reply, spoken from just behind him. The crowd has formed an orderly line, waiting respectfully for the town’s best butcher to finish his work so they can receive their shares. The mayor would have done the offering typically, but in his absence (in his presence, altered) that duty is assumed by the sheriff, a graying woman unsqueamish and unsentimental about her duty.

"Don't let them waste the meat,” Will says.

“Are you worried about going hungry? I can always get you more.”

Will thinks of being dressed in his best clothes twice a year, Christmas in the winter and Easter Sunday in the spring, when he was small enough that he'd ridden on his father's shoulders on their way back to the car. High holy days. “How often is this going to happen?”

"Do you object to being worshipped?"

"It's not me they're worshipping."

"Always so modest," his god says, his voice light. “Less often, now that you’re here. What does it matter? You know more will come to replace the dearly departed Mayor, and any other merry townsfolk you send to me.”

“I know.”

“What a charming morality trap you’ve set for them. They’ll all come to me in the end, but you’ll let them corrupt themselves first.”

He keeps his eyes open as he turns around, but his vision goes dark. His god doesn’t want to be seen yet, coy rather than bashful, drawing out the suspense now that fulfillment is comfortably within reach. “What do you need with them if you have me?”

“My sweet William, are you jealous?”

“Aren’t you?”

"Close your eyes," his god murmurs. His voice is richer and warmer than before, closer to his ear, a faint breeze trailing over his neck. Will closes his eyes. Without needing to be told, he opens his mouth.

The sliver of heart laid on his tongue by his god’s own hand is sliced rose petal thin. The acid in his mouth alone would dissolve it, given enough time. He doesn’t wait that long, swallowing without chewing instead. The wind picks up enough to shake the trees above him, a long-held sigh exhaled, and when he opens his eyes he’s alone on the riverbank with the taste of iron in his mouth.

Will walks back to the church while the rest of the town is still busy by the water, skirting picnic tables and lost shoes on his way inside, exhaustion making him clumsy and slow. He beds down on a bench in the back office, not willing to give into the symbolism of sleeping in the hall of worship, even one that doesn’t have an altar. Sleeping in the church is bad enough, but it’s better than taking over the mayor’s house, which would feel like claiming a deposed monarch’s throne.

He sleeps for fourteen hours, his dreams passing easily out of memory, and wakes up feeling helplessly good.

The church is a modest one-story building, just a main hall, a pair of back offices, a bathroom, and a small kitchen surrounded by whitewashed clapboard walls. Will pokes around in the main hall and finds folding chairs instead of pews, stacked neatly against the sides of the room next to the card tables. A corkboard on the wall with sand dollars hot glued to the corners holds flyers for PTA meetings and a weekly bingo night.

His stomach draws him to the kitchen as soon as he’s finished with the bathroom. Garret Jacob Hobbs smiles at him from the doorway, his wife Louise behind him fanning a pie with an oven mitt.

“Steak and kidney pie,” Hobbs says. “The deputies told us to help ourselves to anything in the kitchen. I hope you don’t mind.”

The white chest freezer in the corner is slightly less full than it had been, the butcher’s best work already being put to use.

“It’s fine,” Will says. The shadow of their daughter, Abigail, flits across the screened-in back door.

“We wanted to show our appreciation for what you did for us,” Hobbs says. Louise takes a single plate out of the cupboard and sets it on the counter, hesitating for long moments before picking up a knife to cut the pie open. “We just appreciated it so much, didn’t we, honey?”

“It was so good of you,” Louise says, her tremulous voice at odds with her smile.

“We just had to say thank you.” Hobbs pulls his wife into his side, his arm around her waist. “Go on, honey, tell him.”

“Thank you,” she says, eyes wide and fixed as she holds the plate out to Will. Steam rich with the fatty char of browned meat rises into the air. Will isn’t sure whether the iron tang of fresh blood is in his imagination, or if his nose is bleeding again, dripping down the back of his throat to seep onto his tongue. “Thank you so much.”

He takes the pie, but can’t bring himself to speak. Hobbs doesn’t notice. The memory of the previous night burns in his mind as hot and dark as a smoldering coal, his devotion already kindled. He watches Will accept his offering with something approaching rapture, and Will can’t do anything but carry the pie outside the church to eat away from the pressure of hungry eyes.

His truck has been moved into the church’s small gravel lot, his keys left dangling from the driver’s side door. One of the deputies moved it while he was sleeping, and had done his best to adjust the seat and mirrors back to where they’d started, but he can see that the angles are slightly off. It doesn’t matter. There’s nowhere he needs to go, anymore.

He holds the untouched slice of pie for long enough that steam stops rising from it before the azaleas lining the driveway rustle and a small yellowish dog trots out. She’s not wearing a collar, but she looks well cared for, coat sleek and full.

Will hesitates for a long moment, then sets the plate down. Her tail whips back and forth as she eats. He waits until she’s licked the plate clean to scratch her ears, then throws a stick for her until she gets bored of chasing it. She sits at his feet, and for a moment her uncomplicated affection is an uneasy echo of Hobbs.

“Go on,” he says, nudging her side gently with his hand. “Go home, now.”

She prances in one last circle around him, then jogs off into the bushes. He drags his palms over the grass to clean off dog spit and feels, for a moment, almost normal. He picks the empty plate up and takes it back to the kitchen.

The first blow catches him across the temple, splitting the bone of his eye socket. Half of his vision goes dark. He staggers back and drops the plate before the second swing connects with his shoulder and drives him down to one knee. Ceramic shards scatter across the floor. Rising panic, not his--the daughter, Abigail, waiting crouched behind the refrigerator for him to come back inside, swinging the tire iron as hard as she can, determination giving way to desperate terror as Will doesn't go down--disorients him further, but his hand moves without his prompting. It catches the tire iron before the third strike can hit his face.

"It won't help," Will says hoarsely. His scalp wound is already closing, the warmth sliding down the side of his face cooling as fresh blood fails to replace it. He feels no pain. His god loves his pain too much to share it. "Even if you could kill me, it wouldn't help. Death is his realm. You can't match him there."

Abigail is white and shaking, but she doesn't let go of the tire iron, using it like a pike to keep him as far away from her as possible. Stray drops of his blood decorate her forehead. Will holds back the urge to draw his thumb across them in a symbol he only knows through instinct. "What are you?"

"Take your mother and run." He stands, wincing at the wet snap of his shoulder settling back into place. "It's too late for your dad. It's not too late for you, but if you stay here any longer, it will be."

For five heartbeats she stares at him. Then she drops her end of the tire iron, leaving him holding it up in midair, and runs, shoes squeaking against the linoleum of the hallway. Will relaxes and lowers the tire iron to his side. She believes him. If she steals his truck like she stole his tire iron, she could be across state lines by sunset.

"I like her."

"She's not yours," Will says, leaning back into the embrace of the not-quite arms forming behind him.

"The father is mine."

"But not the daughter."

His god hums, politely unconvinced. "She may yet come back."

"She might. But it'll be her coming and not someone else bringing her. She's got a chance."

The god licks across his cheek, clearing away the blood. Will closes his eyelids as the wet touch drags from his cheekbone to his eyebrow across his blind eye, then blinks them open to restored vision. His god's face appears before him, as familiar as his own, though he's never seen it clearly before. Only in dreams and the warped reflection of rippling water.

"My dear Will," his god says, the words heavy with satisfaction. "Even you came back."

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